Stability Thresholds for Stream Restoration Materials

by Craig Fischenich[1]

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Complexity	*Value as a Planning Tool*	*Cost*
Low Moderate High	Low Moderate High	Low Moderate High

OVERVIEW

Stream restoration projects usually involve some modification to the channel or the banks. Designers of stabilization or restoration projects must ensure that the materials placed within the channel or on the banks will be stable for the full range of conditions expected during the design life of the project. Unfortunately, techniques to characterize stability thresholds are limited. Theoretical approaches do not exist and empirical data mainly consist of velocity limits, which are of limited value.

Empirical data for shear stress or stream power are generally lacking, but the existing body of information is summarized in this technical note. Whereas shear thresholds for soils found in channel beds and banks are quite low (generally < 0.25 lb/sf), those for vegetated soils (0.5 – 4 lb/sf), erosion control materials and bioengineering techniques (0.5 – 8 lb/sf), and hard armoring (< 13 lb/sf) offer options to provide stability.

STABILITY CRITERIA

The stability of a stream refers to how it accommodates itself to the inflowing water and sediment load. In general, stable streams may adjust their boundaries but do not exhibit trends in changes to their geometric character. One form of instability occurs when a stream is unable to transport its sediment load (i.e., sediments deposited within the channel), leading to the condition referred to as aggradation.

When the ability of the stream to transport sediment exceeds the availability of sediments within the incoming flow, and stability thresholds for the material forming the boundary of the channel are exceeded, erosion occurs. This technical note deals with the latter case of instability and distinguishes the presence or absence of erosion (threshold condition) from the magnitude of erosion (volume).

Erosion occurs when the hydraulic forces in the flow exceed the resisting forces of the channel boundary. The amount of erosion is a function of the relative magnitude of these forces and the time over which they are applied. The interaction of flow with the boundary of open channels is only imperfectly understood. Adequate analytical expressions describing this interaction have not yet been developed for conditions associated with natural channels. Thus, means of characterizing erosion potential must rely heavily upon empiricism.

Traditional approaches for characterizing erosion potential can be placed in one of two categories: maximum permissible velocity, and tractive force (or critical shear stress). The former approach is advantageous in that velocity is a parameter that can be measured within the flow. Shear stress cannot be directly measured – it must be computed from other flow parameters. Shear stress is a better measure of the fluid force on the channel boundary than is velocity. Moreover, conventional guidelines, including ASTM standards, rely upon the shear stress as a

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means of assessing the stability of erosion control materials. Both approaches are presented in this paper.

Incipient Motion (Threshold Condition)

As flow over the bed and banks of a stream increases, a condition referred to as the threshold state is reached when the forces tending to move materials on the channel boundary are in balance with those resisting motion. The forces acting on a noncohesive soil particle lying on the bed of a flowing stream include hydrodynamic lift, hydrodynamic drag, submerged weight ($F_w - F_b$), and a resisting force F_r. as seen in Figure 1. The drag is in the direction of the flow and the lift and weight are normal to the flow. The resisting force depends on the geometry of the particles. At the threshold of movement, the resultant of the forces in each direction is zero. Two approaches for defining the threshold state are discussed herein, initial movement being specified in terms of either a critical velocity (v_{cr}) or a critical shear stress (τ_{cr}).

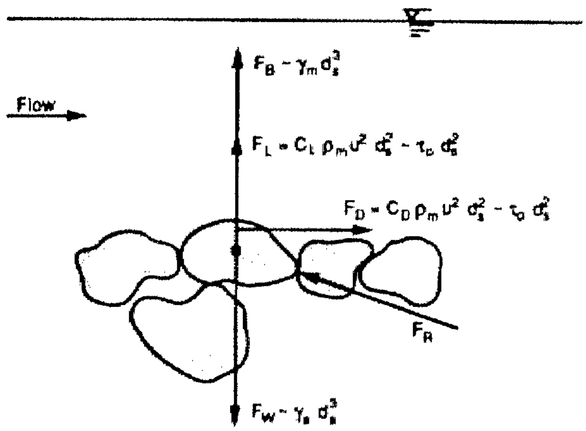

Figure 1. Forces acting on the boundary of a channel (adapted from Julien (1995)).

Critical Velocity

Figure 1 shows that both the lift and the drag force are directly related to the velocity squared. Thus, small changes in the velocity could result in large changes in these forces. The permissible velocity is defined as the maximum velocity of the channel that will not cause erosion of the channel boundary. It is often called the critical velocity because it refers to the condition for the initiation of motion. Early works in canal design and in evaluating the stability of waterways relied upon this method. Considerable empirical data exist relating maximum velocities to various soil and vegetation conditions.

However, this simple method for design does not consider the channel shape or flow depth. At the same mean velocity, channels of different shapes or depths may have quite different forces acting on the boundaries. Critical velocity is depth-dependent, and a correction factor for depth must be applied in this application. Despite these limitations, maximum permissible velocity can be a useful tool in evaluating the stability of various waterways. It is most frequently applied as a cursory analysis when screening alternatives.

Critical Shear Stress

The forces shown in Figure 1 can also be expressed in terms of the shear stress. Shear stress is the force per unit area in the flow direction. Its distribution in steady, uniform, two-dimensional flow in the channel can be reasonably described. An estimate of the average boundary shear stress (τ_o) exerted by the fluid on the bed is:

$$\tau_o = \gamma D S_f \quad (1)$$

where γ is the specific weight of water, D is the flow depth (~ hydraulic radius), and S_f is the friction slope. Derived from consideration of the conservation of linear momentum, this quantity is a spatial average and may not provide a good estimate of bed shear at a point.

Critical shear stress (τ_{cr}) can be defined by equating the applied forces to the resisting forces. Shields (1936) determined the threshold condition by measuring sediment transport for values of shear at least twice the critical value and then extrapolating to the point vanishing sediment transport. His laboratory experiments have since served as a basis for defining critical shear stress. For soil grains of diameter d and angle of repose ϕ on a flat bed, the following relations can approximate the critical shear for various sizes of sediment:

$$\tau_{cr} = 0.5(\lambda_s - \lambda_w) d \, Tan\phi \quad \text{For clays} \quad (2)$$

$$\tau_{cr} = 0.25 d_*^{-0.6} (\lambda_s - \lambda_w) d \, Tan\phi \quad \text{For silts and sands} \quad (3)$$

$\tau_{cr} = 0.06(\lambda_s - \lambda_w)d\ Tan\phi$ For gravels and cobbles (4)

Where

$$d_* = d\left[\frac{(G-1)g}{v^2}\right]^{1/3} \quad (5)$$

γ_s = the unit weight of the sediment
γ_w = the unit weight of the water/sediment mixture
G = the specific gravity of the sediment
G = gravitational acceleration
ν = the kinematic viscosity of the water/sediment mixture

The angle of repose ϕ for noncohesive sediments is presented in Table 1 (Julien 1995), as are values for critical shear stress. The critical condition can be defined in terms of shear velocity rather than shear stress (note that shear velocity and channel velocity are different). Table 1 also provides limiting shear velocity as a function of sediment size. The V_{*c} term is the critical shear velocity and is equal to

$$V_{*c} = \sqrt{gR_hS_f} \quad (6)$$

Table 1. Limiting Shear Stress and Ve locity for Uniform Noncohesive Sediments

Class name	d_s *(in)*	ϕ *(deg)*	τ_c	τ_{cr} *(lb/sf)*	V_{*c} *(ft/s)*
Boulder					
Very large	>80	42	0.054	37.4	4.36
Large	>40	42	0.054	18.7	3.08
Medium	>20	42	0.054	9.3	2.20
Small	>10	42	0.054	4.7	1.54
Cobble					
Large	>5	42	0.054	2.3	1.08
Small	>2.5	41	0.052	1.1	0.75
Gravel					
Very coarse	>1.3	40	0.050	0.54	0.52
Coarse	>0.6	38	0.047	0.25	0.36
Medium	>0.3	36	0.044	0.12	0.24
Fine	>0.16	35	0.042	0.06	0.17
Very fine	>0.08	33	0.039	0.03	0.12
Sands					
Very coarse	>0.04	32	0.029	0.01	0.070
Coarse	>0.02	31	0.033	0.006	0.055
Medium	>0.01	30	0.048	0.004	0.045
Fine	>0.005	30	0.072	0.003	0.040
Very fine	>0.003	30	0.109	0.002	0.035
Silts					
Coarse	>0.002	30	0.165	0.001	0.030
Medium	>0.001	30	0.25	0.001	0.025

Table 1 provides limits best applied when evaluating idealized conditions, or the stability of sediments in the bed. Mixtures of sediments tend to behave differently from uniform sediments. Within a mixture, coarse sediments are generally entrained at lower shear stress values than presented in Table 1. Conversely, larger shear stresses than those presented in the table are required to entrain finer sediments within a mixture.

Cohesive soils, vegetation, and other armor materials can be similarly evaluated to determine empirical shear stress thresholds. Cohesive soils are usually eroded by the detachment and entrainment of soil aggregates. Motivating forces are the same as those for noncohesive banks; however, the resisting forces are primarily the result of cohesive bonds between particles. The bonding strength, and hence the soil erosion resistance, depends on the physio-chemical properties of the soil and the chemistry of the

fluids. Field and laboratory experiments show that intact, undisturbed cohesive soils are much less susceptible to flow erosion than are non-cohesive soils.

Vegetation, which has a profound effect on the stability of both cohesive and noncohesive soils, serves as an effective buffer between the water and the underlying soil. It increases the effective roughness height of the boundary, increasing flow resistance and displacing the velocity upwards away from the soil, which has the effect of reducing the forces of drag and lift acting on the soil surface. As the boundary shear stress is proportional to the square of the near-bank velocity, a reduction in this velocity produces a much greater reduction in the forces responsible for erosion.

Vegetation armors the soil surface, but the roots and rhizomes of plants also bind the soil and introduce extra cohesion over and above any intrinsic cohesion that the bank material may have. The presence of vegetation does not render underlying soils immune from erosion, but the critical condition for erosion of a vegetated bank is usually the threshold of failure of the plant stands by snapping, stem scour, or uprooting, rather than for detachment and entrainment of the soils themselves. Vegetation failure usually occurs at much higher levels of flow intensity than for soil erosion.

Both rigid and flexible armor systems can be used in waterways to protect the channel bed from erosion and to stabilize side slopes. A wide array of differing armor materials are available to accomplish this. Many manufactured products have been evaluated to determine their failure threshold. Products are frequently selected using design graphs that present the flow depth on one axis and the slope of the channel on the other axis. Thus, the design is based on the depth/slope product (i.e., the shear stress). In other cases, the thresholds are expressed explicitly in terms of shear stress. Notable among the latter group are the field performance testing results of erosion control products conducted by the TXDOT/TTI Hydraulics and Erosion Control Laboratory (TXDOT 1999).

Table 2 presents limiting values for shear stress and velocity for a number of different channel lining materials. Included are soils, various types of vegetation, and number of different commonly applied stabilization techniques. Information presented in the table was derived from a number of different sources. Ranges of values presented in the table reflect various measures presented within the literature. In the case of manufactured products, the designer should consult the manufacturer's guidelines to determine thresholds for a specific product.

Uncertainty and Variability

The values presented in Table 2 generally relate to average values of shear stress or velocity. Velocity and shear stress are neither uniform nor steady in natural channels. Short-term pulses in the flow can give rise to instantaneous velocities or stresses of two to three times the average; thus, erosion may occur at stresses much lower than predicted. Because limits presented in Table 2 were developed empirically, they implicitly include some off this variability. However, natural channels typically exhibit much more variability than the flumes from which these data were developed.

Sediment load can also profoundly influence the ability of flow to erode underlying soils. Sediments in suspension have the effect of damping turbulence within the flow. Turbulence is an important factor in entraining materials from the channel boundaries. Thus, velocity and shear stress thresholds are 1.5 to 3 times that presented in the table for flows carrying high sediment loads.

In addition to variability of flow conditions, variation in the channel lining characteristics can influence erosion predictions. Natural bed material is neither spherical nor of uniform size. Larger particles may shield smaller ones from direct impact so that the latter fail to move until higher stresses are attained. For a given grain size, the true threshold criterion may vary by nearly an order of magnitude depending on the bed gradation. Variation in the installation of erosion control measures can reduce the threshold necessary to cause erosion.

Table 2. Permissible Shear and Velocity for Selected Lining Materials[1]

Boundary Category	Boundary Type	Permissible Shear Stress (lb/sq ft)	Permissible Velocity (ft/sec)	Citation(s)
Soils	Fine colloidal sand	0.02 - 0.03	1.5	A
	Sandy loam (noncolloidal)	0.03 - 0.04	1.75	A
	Alluvial silt (noncolloidal)	0.045 - 0.05	2	A
	Silty loam (noncolloidal)	0.045 - 0.05	1.75 – 2.25	A
	Firm loam	0.075	2.5	A
	Fine gravels	0.075	2.5	A
	Stiff clay	0.26	3 – 4.5	A, F
	Alluvial silt (colloidal)	0.26	3.75	A
	Graded loam to cobbles	0.38	3.75	A
	Graded silts to cobbles	0.43	4	A
	Shales and hardpan	0.67	6	A
Gravel/Cobble	1-in.	0.33	2.5 – 5	A
	2-in.	0.67	3 – 6	A
	6-in.	2.0	4 – 7.5	A
	12-in.	4.0	5.5 – 12	A
Vegetation	Class A turf	3.7	6 – 8	E, N
	Class B turf	2.1	4 - 7	E, N
	Class C turf	1.0	3.5	E, N
	Long native grasses	1.2 – 1.7	4 – 6	G, H, L, N
	Short native and bunch grass	0.7 - 0.95	3 – 4	G, H, L, N
	Reed plantings	0.1-0.6	N/A	E, N
	Hardwood tree plantings	0.41-2.5	N/A	E, N
Temporary Degradable RECPs	Jute net	0.45	1 – 2.5	E, H, M
	Straw with net	1.5 – 1.65	1 – 3	E, H, M
	Coconut fiber with net	2.25	3 – 4	E, M
	Fiberglass roving	2.00	2.5 – 7	E, H, M
Non-Degradable RECPs	Unvegetated	3.00	5 – 7	E, G, M
	Partially established	4.0-6.0	7.5 – 15	E, G, M
	Fully vegetated	8.00	8 – 21	F, L, M
Riprap	6 – in. d_{50}	2.5	5 – 10	H
	9 – in. d_{50}	3.8	7 – 11	H
	12 – in. d_{50}	5.1	10 – 13	H
	18 – in. d_{50}	7.6	12 – 16	H
	24 – in. d_{50}	10.1	14 – 18	E
Soil Bioengineering	Wattles	0.2 – 1.0	3	C, I, J, N
	Reed fascine	0.6-1.25	5	E
	Coir roll	3 - 5	8	E, M, N
	Vegetated coir mat	4 - 8	9.5	E, M, N
	Live brush mattress (initial)	0.4 – 4.1	4	B, E, I
	Live brush mattress (grown)	3.90-8.2	12	B, C, E, I, N
	Brush layering (initial/grown)	0.4 – 6.25	12	E, I, N
	Live fascine	1.25-3.10	6 – 8	C, E, I, J
	Live willow stakes	2.10-3.10	3 – 10	E, N, O
Hard Surfacing	Gabions	10	14 – 19	D
	Concrete	12.5	>18	H

[1] Ranges of values generally reflect multiple sources of data or different testing conditions.

A. Chang, H.H. (1988).
B. Florineth. (1982)
C. Gerstgraser, C. (1998).
D. Goff, K. (1999).
E. Gray, D.H., and Sotir, R.B. (1996).
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G. Kouwen, N.; Li, R. M.; and Simons, D.B., (1980).
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I. Schiechtl, H. M. and R. Stern. (1996).
J. Schoklitsch, A. (1937).
K. Sprague, C.J. (1999).
L. Temple, D.M. (1980).
M. TXDOT (1999)
N. Data from Author (2001)
O. USACE (1997).

Changes in the density or vigor of vegetation can either increase or decrease erosion threshold. Even differences between the growing and dormant seasons can lead to one- to twofold changes in erosion thresholds.

To address uncertainty and variability, the designer should adjust the predicted velocity or shear stress by applying a factor of safety or by computing local and instantaneous values for these parameters. Guidance for making these adjustments is presented in the section titled "Application" below.

EROSION MAGNITUDE

The preceding discussion dealt with the presence or absence of erosion, but did not address the extent to which erosion might occur for a given flow. If the thresholds presented in Table 2 are exceeded, erosion should be expected to occur. In reality, even when those thresholds are not exceeded, some erosion in a few select locations may occur. The extent to which this minor erosion could become a significant concern depends in large measure on the duration of the flow, and upon the ability of the stream to transport those eroded sediments.

Flow Duration

Although not stated, limits regarding erosion potential published by manufacturers for various products are typically developed from studies using short flow durations. They do not reflect the potential for severe erosion damage that can result from moderate flow events over several hours. Studies have shown that duration of flow reduces erosion resistance of many types of erosion control products, as shown in Figures 2 - 4. A factor of safety should be applied when flow duration exceeds a couple of hours.

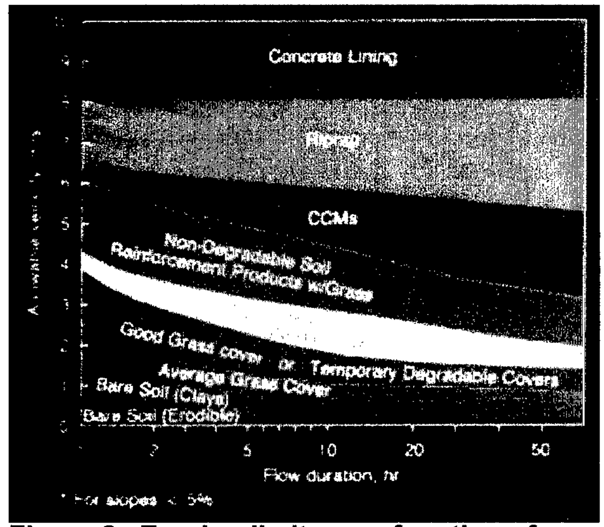

Figure 2. Erosion limits as a function of flow duration (from Fischenich and Allen (2000)).

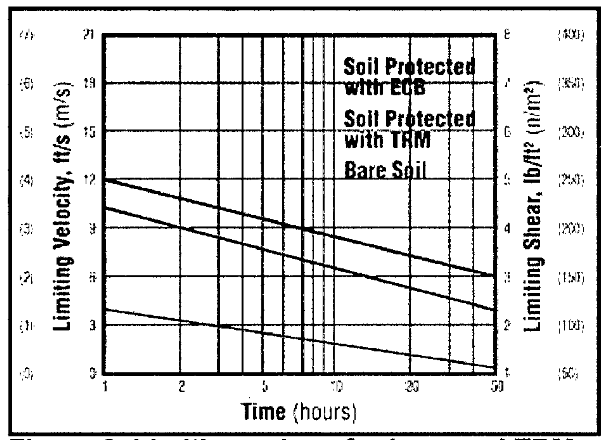

Figure 3. Limiting values for bare and TRM protected soils (from Sprague (1999))

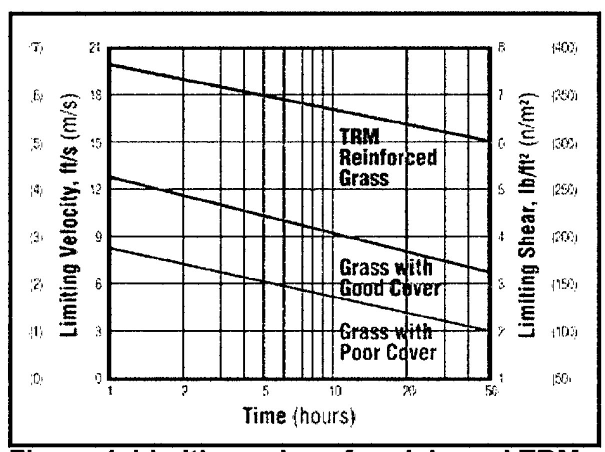

Figure 4. Limiting values for plain and TRM reinforced grass (from Sprague (1999))

Correlations between flow volume and amount of erosion tend to be poor. Multi-peaked flows may be more effective than single flows of comparable or greater magnitude because of the increased incidence of wetting. Flows with long durations often have a more significant effect on erosion than short-lived flows of higher magnitude. Sediment transport analysis can be used to gauge the magnitude of erosion potential in the channel design, but predictive capability is limited.

Sediment Transport

A number of flow measures can be used to assess the ability of a stream to transport sediment. The unit stream power (P_m) is one common approach, and is related to the earlier discussion in that stream power includes both velocity and shear stress as components. Sediment transport (Q_s) increases when the unit stream power (P_m) increases. Unit stream power in turn is controlled by both tractive stress and flow velocity:

$$P_m = v \cdot \tau = v \cdot \gamma_w \cdot D \cdot S_f \qquad (7)$$

The total power (P_t) is the product of the unit power times the channel width (W):

$$P_t = P_m \cdot W = v \cdot W \cdot D \cdot \gamma_w \cdot S_f = v \cdot A \cdot \gamma_w \cdot S_f = Q_w \cdot \gamma_w \cdot S_f \qquad (8)$$

Stream power assessments can be useful in evaluating sediment discharge within a stream channel and the deposition or erosion of sediments from the streambed. However, their utility for evaluating the stability of measures applied to prevent erosion is limited because of the lack of empirical data relating stream power to stability. The analysis of general streambank erosion is not a simple extension of the noncohesive bed case with an added downslope gravity component. Complication is added by other influencing variables, such as vegetation, whose root system can reinforce bank material and increase erosion resistance. Factors influencing bank erosion are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Factors Influencing Erosion

actor	*elevant characteristics*
low properties	lagnitude, frequency and variability of stream discharge; Magnitude and distribution of elocity and shear stress; Degree of turbulence
ediment composition	ediment size, gradation, cohesion and stratification
limate	ainfall amount, intensity and duration; Frequency and duration of freezing
ubsurface conditions	eepage forces; Piping; Soil moisture levels
hannel geometry	Vidth and depth of channel; Height and angle of bank; Bend curvature
iology	'egetation type, density and root character; Burrows
nthropogenic factors	Irbanization, flood control, boating, irrigation

APPLICATION

The stability of a waterway or the suitability of various channel linings can be determined by first calculating both the mean velocity and tractive stress (by the previous equations). These values can then be compared with allowable velocity and tractive stress for a particular ground cover or lining system under consideration (e.g., existing vegetation cover, an erosion control blanket, or bioengineering treatment). Allowable tractive stresses for various types of soil, linings, ground covers, and stabilization measures including soil bioengineering treatments, are listed in Table 2. Additionally, manufacturers' product literature can provide allowable tractive stresses or velocities for various types of erosion control products.

An iterative procedure may be required when evaluating channel stability because various linings will affect the resistance coefficient,

which in turn may change the estimated flow conditions. A general procedure for the application of information presented in this paper is outlined in the following paragraphs.

Step 1-Estimate Mean Hydraulic Conditions. Flow of water in a channel is governed by the discharge, hydraulic gradient, channel geometry, and roughness coefficient. This functional relationship is most frequently evaluated using normal depth or backwater computations that take into account principles of conservation of linear momentum. The latter is preferable because it accounts for variations in momentum slope, which is directly related to shear stress. Several models are available to aid the hydraulic engineer in assessing hydraulic conditions. Notable examples include HEC-2, HEC-RAS, and WSP2. Channel cross sections, slopes, and Manning's coefficients should be determined based upon surveyed data and observed or predicted channel boundary conditions. Output from the model should be used to compute main channel velocity and shear stress at each cross section.

Step 2- Estimate Local/Instantaneous Flow Conditions.
The computed values for velocity and shear stress may be adjusted to account for local variability and instantaneous values higher than mean. A number of procedures exist for this purpose. Most commonly applied are empirical methods based upon channel form and irregularity. Several references at the end of this paper present procedures to make these adjustments. Chang (1988) is a good example. For straight channels, the local maximum shear stress can be assumed from the following simple equation:

$$\tau_{max} = 1.5\tau \qquad (9)$$

for sinuous channels, the maximum shear stress should be determined as a function of the planform characteristics using Equation 10:

$$\tau_{max} = 2.65\,\tau\left(\frac{R_c}{W}\right)^{-0.5} \qquad (10)$$

where R_c is the radius of curvature and W is the top width of the channel. Equations 9 and 10 adjust for the spatial distribution of shear stress; however, temporal maximums in turbulent flows can be 10 – 20 percent higher, so an adjustment to account for instantaneous maximums should be added as well. A factor of 1.15 is usually applied.

Step 3- Determine Existing Stability. Existing stability should be assessed by comparing estimates of local and instantaneous shear and velocity to values presented in Table 2. Both the underlying soil and the soil/vegetation condition should be assessed. If the existing conditions are deemed stable and are in consonance with other project objectives, then no further action is required. Otherwise, proceed to step 4.

Step 4- Select Channel Lining Material. If existing conditions are unstable, or if a different material is needed along the channel perimeter to meet project objectives, a lining material or stabilization measure should be selected from Table 2, using the threshold values as a guideline in the selection. Only material with a threshold exceeding the predicted value should be selected. The other project objectives can also be used at this point to help select from among the available alternatives. Fischenich and Allen (2000) characterize attributes of various protection measures to help in the selection.

Step 5- Recompute Flow Values. Resistance values in the hydraulic computations should be adjusted to reflect the selected channel lining, and hydraulic condition should be recalculated for the channel. At this point, reach- or section-averaged hydraulic conditions should be adjusted to account for local and instantaneous extremes.
Table 4 presents velocity limits for various channel boundaries conditions. This table is useful in screening alternatives, or as an alternative to the shear stress analysis presented in the preceding sections.

Table 4. Stability of Channel Linings for Given Velocity Ranges

Lining	0 – 2 fps	2 – 4 fps	4 – 6 fps	6 – 8 fps	> 8 fps
Sandy Soils					
Firm Loam					
Mixed Gravel and Cobbles					
Average Turf					
Degradable RECPs					
Stabilizing Bioengineering					
Good Turf					
Permanent RECPs					
Armoring Bioengineering					
CCMs & Gabions					
Riprap					
Concrete					

Key:

	Appropriate
	Use Caution
	Not Appropriate

Step 6– Confirm Lining Stability.
The stability of the proposed lining should be assessed by comparing the threshold values in Table 2 to the newly computed hydraulic conditions. These values can be adjusted to account for flow duration using Figures 2-4 as a guide. If computed values exceed thresholds, step 4 should be repeated. If the threshold is not exceeded, a factor of safety for the project should be determined from the following equations:

$$FS = \frac{\tau_{\max}}{\tau_{est}} \quad or \quad FS = \frac{V_{\max}}{V_{est}} \qquad (11)$$

In general, factors of safety in excess of 1.2 or 1.3 should be acceptable. The preceding five steps should be conducted for every cross section used in the analysis for the project. In the event that computed hydraulic values exceed thresholds for any desirable lining or stabilization technique, measures must be undertaken to reduce the energy within the flow. Such measures might include the installation of low-head drop structures or other energy-dissipating devices along the channel. Alternatively, measures implemented within the watershed to reduce total discharge could be employed.

APPLICABILITY AND LIMITATIONS

Techniques described in this technical note are generally applicable to stream restoration projects that include revegetation of the riparian zone or bioengineering treatments.

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1. REPORT IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

A. ORIGINATING AGENCY
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